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## Program to help towns build homes

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USDA Rural Development state director Chuck Banks simply describes the newly unveiled \$25 million Fort Riley Regional Initiative as "groundbreaking" for the agency... "another way for us to leverage our program."

It may also be a way for dozens of small area communities to break ground in a literal way — building living units for the thousands of military personnel expected to be assigned to the area in the next few years.

The Agriculture Department's Fort Riley Regional Initiative, officially announced Monday, will provide \$25 million in guaranteed lending assistance targeted directly at military families wanting to buy or build homes in rural communities of 20,000 or less in population in the Fort Riley region.

Banks said there are 100 incorporated towns under 20,000 population within a 60-mile radius of Fort Riley that would fall into that category. Manhattan is not one of the, but Junction City, with a population of 18,886, is. Others include Wamego, Riley, Ogden, Alma, Westmoreland, St. George, Marysville and Clay Center.

A memorandum of agreement was signed during a ceremony Monday by Banks and Maj. Gen. Dennis Hardy, commander of the 24th Infantry Division and Fort Riley. Also on hand was U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts and U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran. The \$25 million is in addition to \$47 million in guaranteed assistance Kansas will receive from the agency for fiscal year 2006.

The program is fueled by the imminent arrival of 3,400 troops with the 6th Brigade, 25th Infantry, which is one of the Army's new unit of action brigades. Along with the troops will come an estimated 4,700 family members and 1,200 civilian employees. The brigade is expected to be at full force on post by March of 2006; however, because of housing limitations on post, the soldiers must find housing off post. "We recognized providing adequate housing would be one of the biggest challenges we would face," Roberts said of the troops' pending arrivals.

John Armbrust, executive director of the Governor's Strategic Military Planning Commission, described Monday's announcement as "extremely positive." "Up until now we've been focused mainly on getting the houses built, and houses built that are affordable," Armbrust said. "This (program) will allow the soldiers to possibly receive funds quicker and easier, and the ability to buy these affordable homes."

Under program guidelines, local banks make the initial loans to the military families and then the USDA guarantees the loan.

"This way a bank can make more loans and families can buy more affordable housing," Banks said.

Banks said the pool of \$25 million in loan money was figured through information provided by the U.S. Army on the estimated grade levels of the incoming troops.

Armbrust said since it was announced that Fort Riley would be assigned one of the new brigades about a year ago, the focus has been on encouraging housing developers to build homes in the range of \$100,000 to \$150,000.

Banks noted that the agency has already started processing some loans for early arriving troops. Information on the program can be found on the agency's web site.

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